

Testimony In Re: HB6884

An Act Concerning the Recruitment, Retention, and Enhancement of the Teaching Profession

March 14, 2023

Members of the Education Committee,

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on HB6884. There are many important proposals in this bill however, I would like to support and comment specifically on section 10 which proposes raising the kindergarten starting age and on section 11 which addresses play-based learning in preschool through grades five.

As a teacher I have been in and around education for the past 26 years. I have children of my own who currently attend public schools. I currently serve on the Board of Education in the town of Canton. I had the privilege of teaching kindergarten for 16 years both half day and full day programs in South Carolina, North Carolina and in Connecticut. I have seen first hand the negative impact of having children start kindergarten at the early age of four. Children who I observed starting at age four were at an immediate disadvantage compared to their peers who were already age five or even age six! Connecticut is the only state with such a late entry date. I support changing the age five entry date to September 1. The reality is the educational landscape of kindergarten has changed drastically over the past 26 plus years. The demands put on these young learners has increased and as many kindergarten teachers often say “the gift of time” is necessary for these children. Most children at age five usually have an easier time with fine motor activities, socializing, self-control, can better handle organized activities, manage themselves in the classroom setting and are better prepared to make new friends. Being able to do these things can help build confidence, make a child more excited about school and have better success completing tasks resulting in less social-emotional and behavioral issues for some. I would however strongly recommend that this change be phased in over a period of a few years to plan for the impact this may have on families, educational systems and care providers.

In addition, I fully support in Section 11 the proposal to require play-based learning in kindergarten and preschool as well as in grades one through five. I am grateful to see this in the bill however I am appalled that this must even be a discussion. Where has play gone? Play is not new, it has been tried and true for centuries for the development of healthy, creative, successful, resilient and emotionally strong human beings. Play is the most valuable way that children learn. Play is important for healthy brain development and for learning how to self-regulate emotions. Through play children learn and develop literacy skills, cognitive skills, physical abilities and social skills. Yet we have taken it out of many of our classrooms. Over the years I’ve observed that play has gradually been forgotten, pushed aside, minimized, taken out of schedules, ignored, underutilized and undervalued. This MUST STOP! Not only has play decreased in schools, it has decreased in homes. Most children are not playing outside in their yards or in neighborhoods like years ago. Things are more structured, scheduled and planned. In addition, children are on technology more now than ever in schools and at home which interferes with quality playtime. We are robbing children of a childhood.

Parents trust schools to do what is right for their children. I have painfully watched my own children have limited play in school. For example in kindergarten, the time children play in centers has decreased while more rigorous required academic curriculum has filled these young learners’ school day schedule. Teachers in all grades are pushed to teach more reading, writing, mathematical, science and social studies content leaving no room for any kind of play. The hyper focus on testing and teaching to the test has consumed many educators. This is a

tragedy and a recipe for increased mental health issues. Experts through research and statistics are telling us that we have a mental health crisis, that children are more anxious, there are more behavioral problems, social-emotional issues, higher rates of suicide among teenagers and increased needs within most classrooms. Bring back play to our schools, in ALL grades as it improves learning, reduces stress, reduces anxiety and will improve the well being of all.

Recommendations

- 1) I respectfully request that you amend the language in section 11 (c) to **require** a teacher to utilize play-based learning during the instructional time of a regular school day in grades **one to five**, inclusive.
- 2) I recommend that we require teachers and administrators to get properly trained in the value of play and how to incorporate play. As well as provide the funding, resources and materials necessary.
- 3) I recommend creating a task force or a discussion group with highly skilled current teachers, retired teachers, school personnel who understand child development and local school board of education members to discuss the challenges in education, curriculum and the social emotional/mental health of all students. Too often decisions about education are made without the feedback of educators.
- 4) I also encourage each and every committee member to take the time to speak to teachers, visit schools, spend time in classrooms, talk to students of all ages and talk to parents about the current state of our educational system. We can no longer make decisions about education without fully understanding what is going on in our schools and without getting adequate feedback from a variety of stakeholders.

Thank you for your consideration,

Kim Sullivan

CT Certified Teacher, Teacher 17 years, Parent, Canton Public Schools Board of Education Member